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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000383

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING  
STATE FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/FO:ATACHCO

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GENERAL AOUN HOSTS AMBASSADOR IN  
ATTEMPTED RAPPROCHEMENT

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Michel Aoun is seeking to portray himself to the USG (and possibly to Lebanon) in a new light -- not so close to Hizballah after all, skeptical of Syrian intentions and of President Lahoud, dismissive of Amal, and supportive of the international tribunal. He puts forth a vision of a nonconfessional future for Lebanon which can be realized through electoral reform and an embrace of Lebanon's Shia, whom Aoun believes are ready to join the Western orientation of Lebanon's Christian community. Nevertheless, Aoun is sticking to his demands for a robust share of the cabinet for himself and a blocking minority for his fellow members of the opposition. He is laying out requirements for Lebanon's next president, which he believes only he can fulfill. End Summary.

A LONG-DELAYED DINNER

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¶2. (C) The Ambassador and Polchief went to dinner at the Rabieh house of Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader General Michel Aoun on March 12, responding to an invitation that had been two months in the making. Aoun's physician, Nabil Tawil, had first proposed to host a one-on-one dinner between the Ambassador and Aoun in January to improve the atmosphere between the USG and Aoun, to enable the Ambassador to get to know Aoun better on a personal basis. Aoun balked, but his associates, including Ibrahim Kanaan, took the idea on and proposed a &family dinner8 at Rabieh which was delayed due to Aoun son-in-law Gebran Bassil's automobile accident in Nigeria.

BASSIL STILL CLOSEST TO AOUN

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¶3. (C) Because of Bassil's continuing convalescence and Aoun's reluctance to have anyone appear to replace Bassil as his right-hand-man, Aoun hosted the dinner alone. Aoun underlined Bassil's central role as his closest, most trusted advisor when he told the Ambassador that if anyone on the USG side has issues with Bassil, they should approach Aoun directly. The Ambassador acknowledged that we are concerned that Bassil may be too close to Hizballah and Amal and may as a result be pulling Aoun's Free Patriotic

Movement in directions that may not reflect its core values.

Aoun took this on board but reaffirmed that Bassil will remain his closest official.

HIZBALLAH

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¶4. (C) Throughout the dinner Aoun minimized his ties to and knowledge of Hizballah, giving pat answers to our questions about the terrorist group and its ties to Iran and Syria. Aoun said that at no point since his February 2006 Memorandum of Understanding with Hizballah had he had the impression that Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah wanted to coordinate with the Syrians. Hizballah, he averred, does not want to suffer "political revenge" because of a close association with Damascus. Aoun believed that Hizballah commands the loyalty of no more than 30 percent of Shia voters in Lebanon.

¶5. (C) Hizballah's rearming is out of a fear of becoming involved in another war with Israel, Aoun said (though he confided to us that he does not blame the IDF for having contingency plans for another Lebanon war). Hizballah failed to predict that the Israelis would react to its cross-border attack and kidnapping in July 2006 in a way similar to the way they had reacted to a comparable raid from Gaza a month before, because "Hizballah considers itself different" and does not understand Israel.

¶6. (C) While Hizballah has close relations with Iran, it has given up the idea of an Islamic Republic in Lebanon, he claimed. Aoun furthermore took credit for persuading Nasrallah's Deputy Naim Qassem to make a recent statement in which he disavowed any intention of involving Hizballah in a possible future U.S.-Iranian war. As for Aoun's own meetings

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with the Iranians, he claimed that they are cordial in nature but that Aoun has made it clear to them that he will not be a part of any "axis."

¶7. (C) Aoun took credit for influencing Hizballah to move closer to the Lebanese mainstream. He said that as long as he is involved with Hizballah, the party cannot compel unwilling Shia to join it or support it. When the Ambassador mentioned that the Berri-Hariri dialogue might serve to reduce Sunni-Shia tensions, Aoun claimed that, as part of the opposition, he had "succeeded in controlling an eventual civil war, which once ignited would be uncontrollable." Aoun claimed to be the one who ensured Hizballah would not bring weapons to the January 23 demonstrations and who, when the demonstrations turned confrontational, persuaded Hizballah to leave the streets.

AMAL

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¶8. (C) Aoun said that Amal supporters were the ones most directly responsible for the January violence, being less disciplined and experienced than Hizballah's operatives, and that Amal is the opposition party that coordinates with Syria, not Hizballah. When asked, Aoun opined that Amal has no popular support left, as the party has been discredited through its rampant corruption. Hizballah supports Amal, he said, to strengthen the image of Shia unity. Aoun agreed with the Ambassador that Berri's emphasis on engineering a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Syria is an effort to prove his worth to Damascus, and added that Berri is the opposition leader who coordinates with the Syrians, rather than Hizballah.

TRIBUNAL

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¶9. (C) Aoun insisted he had always supported the tribunal unconditionally, and even showed us a 2005 transcript in which he claimed to have called for an international tribunal

earlier and in stronger terms than had Saad Hariri. Aoun could not say what specific reservations other opposition leaders had about the tribunal, but speculated that Damascus was concerned about the power that might ultimately be wielded by tribunal judges. He pointed out that four Lebanese security chiefs had been jailed since 2005 despite the fact that two UN International Independent Investigation Commission (UNIIIC) Commissioners -- Mehlis and Brammertz -- had admitted they did not have evidence against them sufficient for any judge to file a charge. He noted that a human rights NGO had recently cited their case and the Ambassador mentioned that the case had also figured in the USG's annual Human Rights Report on Lebanon. The Ambassador asked why Hizballah and Amal had resigned from the cabinet over an issue as seemingly trivial as Prime Minister Siniora's November 2006 decision to convene a cabinet session two days early to pass the tribunal. Aoun speculated that Siniora's mishandling of the issue had provided the "excuse to flee" when it appeared that they would not have the chance to present changes they wanted to introduce.

A NONCONFESSIONAL FUTURE THROUGH NATIONAL  
PARTIES AND ELECTORAL REFORM  
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¶10. (C) Despite his support for the tribunal and his hard work in bringing Hizballah into the fold, Aoun said, his detractors have sought to build a false image of him and have attacked the image, not the reality. Aoun predicted a future in which Lebanon would shed confessional politics completely; he dismissed fears of Shia extremism a la Hizballah and insisted that Shia would move closer to the Christian worldview (i.e., a liberal, western orientation) rather than the opposite. The Ambassador noted that the USG supports electoral law reform in Lebanon and would soon begin a public relations campaign to that effect. Aoun predicted that the return of Lebanon to a system of small electoral districts would have positive effects for the country. Scattered populations of Christians would regain the ability to elect their own representatives, but overall a reformed electoral system would force parties to compete on a national basis, rather than competing for pockets of regional or confessional

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voters. Such a system would benefit the FPM which, Aoun claimed, is the only party organized to compete on a national basis.

CABINET, PARLIAMENT AND PRESIDENCY  
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¶11. (C) Aoun reported that after his first meetings with Mustaqbal Party Leader Saad Hariri, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri had told Aoun that Hariri wanted to discuss matters such as the presidency, Paris III reforms, and the implementation of UNSCR 1701. Berri reportedly told Hariri he wanted to deal with the issue of forming a new cabinet first. Aoun reported to us he was sticking to his firm position on the cabinet, insisting on four out of 24 ministers, or five out of 30, as well as a full one-third-plus-one number of ministers in the cabinet who represent opposition parties. Aoun defended his insistence on a "blocking minority" for the opposition by maintaining that the government is already blocked. Besides, he noted, the one-third-plus-one would be made up of four parties -- FPM, Amal, Hizballah, and the Zahle Bloc. Aoun rejected the notion of a "neutral" eleventh minister in the context of the oft-discussed 19-10-1 Cabinet composition.

¶12. (C) The Chamber of Deputies would not convene its scheduled session on March 20, Aoun added. To permit that to occur would be tantamount to acknowledging the existence and legitimacy of the Siniora government, something the opposition is not prepared to do. On the presidency, Aoun rejected the idea of Emile Lahoud remaining in office beyond his extended term, which ends in November. Aoun questioned

Lahoud's service as "guardian of the constitution," which he had sworn to be. Aoun implied that the March 8-Aoun deputies in parliament would block the required two-thirds vote to elect a new president unacceptable to them, if necessary. If no president is chosen on the first round of voting, the second round, in which a president can be chosen by simple majority, could also be blocked by the opposition, Aoun maintained, simply by preventing the convening of a quorum of two-thirds of the Chamber's membership. (Note: March 14 leaders and lawyers do not share this interpretation of the constitution. End Note.) While not explicitly advocating his own candidacy, Aoun commented that Lebanon's next president should be a leader who can act as a guarantor for the implementation of UNSCR 1701, the Paris III reforms, and the tribunal, and then claimed that he was the one who could guarantee them.

COMMENT

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¶13. (C) Some hard political talk notwithstanding, Aoun appeared eager to return a degree of life to our long-fallow relationship with him. Perhaps he senses that the opposition movement will have to come in from the cold at some point, whether victorious or defeated. It appears that Aoun hopes he will have a soft landing with the international community when that happens.

FELTMAN